

**(Fort Lauderdale, FL)** Today, Congressman Alcee L. Hastings (D-Miramar) issued the following statement in commemoration of the 35<sup>th</sup> annual Black History Month:

“In 1926, Harvard Graduate and noted historian Carter G. Woodson founded ‘Negro History Week,’ a global recognition and celebration of African American contributions to the Americas and to the world in general. Woodson chose the second week of February, because it marked the birthdays of two Americans who had a profound influence in the fight for equality for African-Americans: Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States and Fredrick Douglass, former slave and abolitionist.

“The initial purpose of ‘Negro History Week’ (later Black History Month) was to inform, educate, and dispel racial typecasts and correct the historical record, which suggested the only history African-Americans owned, was one of slavery, subjugation, and inferiority. Woodson believed that in order for African-Americans to eradicate the demoralizing shadows of systematic bondage and move forward into the light of sovereignty, they would need to foster an ideology which revealed their true selves: a people of resilience, intellect, strength, creativity, and determination.

“Thirty-five years later, Black History Month continues to educate and highlight the remarkable contributions of people of the African diaspora in the arts, sciences, humanities, military, and politics which are all too often downplayed, denied and ignored. People of the African diaspora have played crucial roles in some of the most famous events in American history. African-American inventor Garrett Augustus Morgan created the gas mask—then became renowned for using his mask to save workers trapped in a toxic fume-filled tunnel. Matthew Henson, an African-American, was one of the first people to reach the North Pole. Otis Boykin, another African-American, invented electronic control devices for guided missiles, IBM computers, and the control unit for a pacemaker. African-American surgeon Charles R. Drew is often credited with the invention of the first large-scale blood bank. Much like the accomplishments of those before him, Barack Obama shattered yet another significant racial barrier in public service by becoming the first African-American President of the United States,” said Hastings.

While changes in discriminatory laws and statutes have increased economic, career, and educational opportunities for people of the African diaspora in the United States, vast socioeconomic disparities continue to exist between African-Americans and their white

counterparts. The economic downturn has aggravated these disparities. The unemployment rate for African-Americans, for instance, was 15.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 2010, compared to 8.7 percent for whites. While incomes have declined across the board this decade, African-Americans and Latinos were hit the hardest. Since 2000, African-Americans' household incomes decreased 1.4 percent per year. These rates are significantly higher than that of whites, whose incomes declined 0.5 percent per year between 2000 and 2009. Moreover, in 2009, 25.9 percent of African-Americans were in poverty compared to only 9.4 percent of white Americans.

Homeownership rates tell a similar story. In the third quarter of 2010, the homeownership rates for African-Americans was 45.0 percent while the homeownership rate for whites was 74.7 percent.

Disparities in health are also troubling. It is appropriate that National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day occurs during Black History Month. Although African-Americans comprise roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for nearly half of all HIV/AIDS infections. And, African-Americans generally have higher rates of premature births, African-American women have higher mortality rates from breast cancer, and African-American suffer disproportionately from chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

"The African-American community continues to face ongoing systematic economic inequalities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is reminiscent of our nation's past. However, such history gives us an opportunity to build a better and brighter future. Black History Month allows us to celebrate the contributions and progress that African-Americans have made, and develop solutions that will combat persistent inequalities which will result in stronger communities and a stronger nation. For these reasons, I am extremely pleased to commemorate Black History Month and encourage my colleagues to join me in doing so as well," Hastings further commented.

***Congressman Alcee L. Hastings represents Florida's 23<sup>rd</sup> Congressional district. He is a senior member of the House Rules Committee and Co-Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission.***

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